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ABSTRACT

Because fantasy has a special role in the lives of children, the meaning and consequences of fantasy experiences in children's lives are central psychological questions. Although the scientific study of fantasy is in its infancy, it does seem to be the case that children with rich fantasy lives have better self-control and are less likely to be impulsive and overly active than children with impoverished fantasy lives. Cathartic effects of viewing violent dramatic themes in television and films are not likely to occur; in fact, aggressive behavior may be stimulated by exposure to vicarious violence. In this area of psychological research, the challenge to the scientist is to determine combinations of factors that lead to an increase in aggression, conditions that mitigate or eliminate the impact of television violence, and conditions that facilitate a cathartic effect. In this regard, a critical factor is the extent to which a television drama is perceived either as a real event or as a form of make-believe or fantasy. Data indicate that violence on television perceived as fantasy strongly reduces aggression-stimulating effects and may even result in catharsis. Research results also indicate that children who watch a great deal of television are children whose internal fantasies are disturbing. In contrast, children whose fantasies are pleasant and who enjoy engaging in fantasy are children who read. (RH)

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FANTASY AND CHILDREN

SEYMOUR FESHBACH

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FANTASY IS COMMON TO THE LIVES OF ALL OF US, ADULTS AND CHILDREN. WE ALL, IN VARYING DEGREES, LET OUR MINDS WANDER, IMAGINE OURSELVES AS HEROES AS FINANCIAL TYCOONS, AS GREAT LEADERS, GREAT SCIENTISTS, OR GREAT ARTISTS OR GREAT ATHLETES OR GREAT LOVERS. SOMETIMES OUR VISIONS ARE LESS NOBLE, AND WE SEE OURSELVES AS SUCCESSFULLY WREAKING VENGEANCE ON THOSE WHO MAY HAVE EXPLOITED, HUMILIATED OR OTHERWISE INJURED US. FANTASY EMBRACES NOT ONLY THESE SELF-GENERATED FLIGHTS OF IMAGINATION BUT IT IS ALSO REFLECTED IN MANY OF OUR PLAY ACTIVITIES SUCH AS GAMES OF CHARADES AND, EVEN OCCURS WHEN WE SLEEP, AS IN OUR DREAMS. AND OF COURSE, A VERY VITAL COMPONENT OF OUR FANTASY LIFE ARE THE VICARIOUS EXPERIENCES THAT WE SHARE WHEN WE WITNESS A PLAY, A TELEVISION DREAM, A MOVIE, OR A WALT DISNEY CARTOON. INDEED, WALKING THROUGH DISNEYLAND IS IN ITSELF A FANTASY EXPERIENCE.

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WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT FANTASY IS A UNIVERSAL HUMAN ACTIVITY IN WHICH PEOPLE AT ALL AGE LEVELS ENGAGE, FANTASY HAS A VERY SPECIAL ROLE IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN. WE MAY ALL ENJOY FAIRY TALES BUT IT WAS FOR CHILDREN THAT HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSON INVENTED THUMBELINA, THE UGLY DUCKLING AND HIS OTHER IMMORTAL CHARACTERS. AND IT WAS AND IS FOR AUDIENCES OF CHILDREN THAT MICKEY MOUSE, FANTASIA, SNOW WHITE, AND PINOCCHIO, WERE INTENDED. IT IS CHILDREN WHO CONSTANTLY ENGAGE IN MAKE-BELIEVE, IN THEIR PLAY AND IN THEIR CONVERSATION, USUALLY TO THE AMUSEMENT OF THEIR PARENTS AND SOMETIMES TO THEIR DISTRESS. CONSEQUENTLY, ALTHOUGH THE ROLE OF FANTASY IN THE LIFE OF ADULTS IS AN IMPORTANT PSYCHOLOGICAL QUESTION, THE MEANING AND CONSEQUENCES OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF FANTASY EXPERIENCES IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN ARE CENTRAL PSYCHOLOGICAL QUESTIONS. WE WANT TO KNOW NOT ONLY THE ROLE THAT FANTASY PLAYS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD BUT ALSO WHETHER IT CAN BE HARMFUL. WHETHER CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

IN FANTASY ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED, OR WHETHER REWARDING FANTASY BEHAVIOR TENDS TO KEEP THE CHILD IMMATURE, AND THEREFORE FANTASY SHOULD BE DISCOURAGED RATHER THAN FOSTERED.

THESE ARE COMPLEX QUESTIONS THAT ARE NOT EASILY INVESTIGATED AND THAT DO NOT LEND THEMSELVES TO SIMPLE "YES-NO" GENERALIZATIONS. HOWEVER, ALTHOUGH THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF FANTASY IS VERY MUCH IN ITS BEGINNING STAGES, PSYCHOLOGISTS HAVE ACQUIRED SOME KNOWLEDGE CONCERNING THIS VAGUE AND AMORPHOUS ACTIVITY THAT IS THEORETICALLY INTERESTING AND MAY BE CLINICALLY USEFUL AS WELL. FROM A THEORETICAL STANDPOINT, FANTASY HAS ALWAYS HAD AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN PSYCHOANALYTIC THOUGHT. FREUD HAD SPECULATED THAT WHEN THE YOUNG INFANT EXPERIENCES A NEED THAT CANNOT BE IMMEDIATELY GRATIFIED; FOR EXAMPLE, THE INFANT MAY BE HUNGRY AND IS NOT IMMEDIATELY FED, THEN IMAGES ARISE- OF A BOTTLE OR BREAST, THAT HELP THE INFANT BRIDGE THE DELAY BETWEEN THE ONSET OF THE HUNGER AND THE ACTUAL FEEDING. THESE EARLY IMAGINING EXPERIENCES PROVIDE THE BASIS FOR THE SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENT OF FANTASY AND THOUGHT THAT HELP THE CHILD CONTROL ITS IMPULSES AND DELAY GRATIFICATION. WHETHER OR NOT FREUD'S SPECULATIONS CONCERNING THE ORIGIN OF FANTASY ARE VALID, IT DOES SEEM TO BE THE CASE THAT CHILDREN WITH RICH FANTASY LIVES, HAVE BETTER SELF-CONTROL and are LESS LIKELY TO BE IMPULSIVE AND OVERLY ACTIVE THAN CHILDREN WITH IMPOVERISHED fantasy LIVES.

BUT THERE IS ANOTHER ASSUMPTION THAT FREUD MADE REGARDING THE ROLE OF FANTASY-NAMELY THAT FANTASY SERVES AS A SUBSTITUTE MODE OF GRATIFICATION WHEN GRATIFICATION IN THE REAL WORLD IS NOT AVAILABLE; FANTASY THEREBY IS SAID TO DISCHARGE TENSION. THIS IS THE SO-CALLED CATHARSIS HYPOTHESIS, AND THERE IS CURRENTLY A GREAT DEAL OF CONTROVERSY CONCERNING THIS HYPOTHESIS. THE IDEA OF CATHARSIS IS A VERY OLD ONE, DATING BACK TO ARISTOTLE WHO BELIEVED THAT THE ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDIES HELPED PURGE OR DISCHARGE DISTURBING TENSION IN THE AUDIENCE. ON THE BASIS OF THIS IDEA OF CATHARSIS THAT WAS PUT FORTH BY ARISTOTLE AND BY FREUD, IT WAS INFERRED THAT WITNESSING VIOLENT DRAMA, WHETHER IN THE

THEATRE, IN THE MOVIE HOUSE, OR ON TELEVISION, SHOULD HELP REDUCE AGGRESSIVE IMPULSES IN THE AUDIENCE. WE NOW KNOW THAT THIS EXPECTATION IS NAIVE, THAT SIMPLY WATCHING A VIOLENT FILM NEED NOT REDUCE AGGRESSIVE IMPULSES AND BEHAVIOR. IN FACT, THE CONTRARY EFFECT HAS OFTEN BEEN OBSERVED, THAT EXPOSURE TO VIOLENT DRAMATIC THEMES IN TELEVISION AND FILMS CAN STIMULATE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR. ALSO, A VERY FREQUENT FINDING FROM NATURALISTIC STUDIES IS THAT EXPOSURE TO FILM AND TV VIOLENCE HAS LITTLE OR NO INPUT ON THE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR OF THE VIEWER. CATHARSIS HAS BEEN DEMONSTRATED IN RESEARCH, BUT NOT OFTEN.

THERE CLEARLY ARE MANY FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE EFFECTS OF EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE ON THE MEDIA. THE CHALLENGE TO THE SCIENTIST IS TO DETERMINE THOSE COMBINATIONS OF FACTORS THAT LEAD TO AN INCREASE IN AGGRESSION, THOSE THAT MITIGATE OR ELIMINATE THE IMPACT OF TV VIOLENCE AND THOSE CONDITIONS THAT FACILITATE A CATHARTIC EFFECT. IN MY OWN RESEARCH I HAVE FOUND THAT A VERY CRITICAL FACTOR IS THE EXTENT TO WHICH A TELEVISION DRAMA IS PERCEIVED AS A REAL EVENT AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH IT IS PERCEIVED AS A FORM OF MAKE-BELIEVE OR FANTASY. CHILDREN DIFFER IN THEIR DISCRIMINATION OF WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT IS FANTASY ON TELEVISION. VERY YOUNG CHILDREN, CERTAINLY, FIND IT HARD TO MAKE THESE DISCRIMINATIONS, IN ADDITION TO THERE BEING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE TENDENCY TO PERCEIVE THE DEPICTION OF FICTIONAL EVENTS ON TELEVISION AS REAL OR AS FANTASY, TELEVISION DRAMAS VARY IN THEIR REALISTIC AND FICTIONAL QUALITIES. SOME ARE SO REALISTICALLY PRESENTED THAT FOR THE VIEWER, FOR ALL INTENSIVE PURPOSES, THEY ARE DEPICTIONS OF REAL EVENTS. OTHERS IN STYLE AND CONTENT, CLEARLY CONVERT THE IDEA THAT THE DRAMATIC EVENTS DEPICTED ARE MADE UP AND BELONG TO THE REALM OF FANTASY. OUR DATA INDICATE THAT VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION PERCEIVED AS FANTASY STRONGLY REDUCES AGGRESSION STIMULATING EFFECTS AND may even result in CATHARIS. STUDIES BY OTHER EXPERIMENTERS HAVE CONSISTENTLY SHOWN SIGNIFICANTLY LESS AGGRESSION IN VIEWERS SUBSEQUENT TO THEIR PERCEIVING TELEVISION VIOLENCE BELIEVED TO BE FANTASY AS COMPARED TO TELEVISION VIOLENCE

BELIEVED TO BE REAL.

THE MOST IMPORTANT IMPLICATION, IN MY JUDGMENT, OF THESE STUDIES IS THAT FANTASY ACTIVITY IS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE POSITIVE EFFECTS FOR THE CHILD'S BEHAVIOR AND DEVELOPMENT WHEN THE CHILD MAKES A CLEAR DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE FANTASY WORLD AND THE REAL WORLD. WHEN FANTASY SPILLS OVER INTO REALITY OR, MORE SERIOUSLY, WHEN FANTASY TAKES THE PLACE OF REALITY, IS WHEN ONE HAS TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF FANTASY ACTIVITY. ON THE WHOLE, HOWEVER, FANTASY ACTIVITIES HAVE A BENIGN INFLUENCE ON THE CHILD AND MAY EVEN BE NECESSARY FOR THE CHILD'S PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH. IN ADDITION TO THE IMPULSE CONTROL AND POSSIBLE CATHARTIC FUNCTIONS OF FANTASY ON WHICH PSYCHOANALYSIS HAS FOCUSSED, OTHER THEORISTS HAVE POINTED TO THE PROBLEM SOLVING PROPERTIES OF FANTASY-AN ACTIVITY THAT PERMITS ONE TO TRY OUT SAFELY IN ONE'S IMAGINATION AN ALMOST INFINITE VARIETY OF SOLUTIONS TO SOME DIFFICULTY, AND TO THE UTILITY OF FANTASY TO THE CHILD AS A MEANS FOR REHEARSING AND PRACTICING BEHAVIORS THAT HE OR SHE WILL NEED AS ADULTS. CHILDREN, IN THEIR PLAY, HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO ACT OUT ROLES-THAT OF MOTHER, BROTHER, TEACHER, EMPLOYER, THAT THEY WILL ASSUME AT A LATER POINT IN THEIR LIVES.

THE EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT, AS THESE THEORETICAL FUNCTIONS SUGGEST, CHILDREN WHO HAVE A VARIED INTERNAL FANTASY LIFE-WHO DAYDREAM, WITHIN LIMITS OF COURSE, WHO PLAY AT MAKE-BELIEVE GAMES, ARE MORE COMPETENT AND BETTER ADJUSTED. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A RICH, INTERNAL FANTASY LIFE AND A FANTASY LIFE THAT IS EXTERNALLY GENERATED BY WATCHING A GREAT DEAL OF TELEVISION OR FREQUENT VISITS TO THE MOVIE THEATRES. ARE THESE TWO FORMS OF FANTASY-INTERNALLY VERSUS EXTERNALLY GENERATED, EQUIVALENT. THE ANSWER IS NO!

WE HAVE ALREADY INDICATED THAT A HEAVY DIET OF TV VIOLENCE CAN HAVE

NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON CHILDREN. MORE GENERALLY, WE HAVE FOUND THAT CHILDREN WHO WATCH A GREAT DEAL OF TELEVISION ARE CHILDREN WHOSE INTERNAL FANTASIES ARE DISTURBING-WHOSE DAYDREAMS, FOR EXAMPLE, MAKE THEM FEEL GUILTY OR SAD OR AFRAID OR ANGRY. IN CONTRAST, CHILDREN WHOSE FANTASIES ARE PLEASANT, AND WHO ENJOY ENGAGING IN FANTASY ARE CHILDREN WHO ENJOY AND ENGAGE IN READING RATHER THAN WATCH MANY HOURS OF TELEVISION A DAY. CAN MEDIA FANTASY EXERCISE A POSITIVE ROLE IN CHILDREN'S LIVES? I THINK THE ANSWER IS YES. WE HAVE ALREADY INDICATED THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN FULLY UNDERSTANDING THE FICTIONAL NATURE OF FILMS AND TV DRAMAS, AND EXPERIENCING THEM AS FANTASY. I WOULD FURTHER SUGGEST THAT FILMS THAT CAPTURE THE CHILD'S IMAGINATION, THAT GIVE THE CHILD A CHANCE TO EMBELLISH, PARTICIPATE IN AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE MEDIA EXPERIENCE ARE LIKELY TO HAVE CONSTRUCTIVE, DESIRABLE EFFECTS. THE GREAT CHILDREN'S FILMS AND CARTOONS HAVE THESE PROPERTIES.

AS PSYCHOLOGISTS LEARN MORE ABOUT FANTASY AND FILMS, ABOUT THE MYSTERIOUS PROCESS THAT PERMITS ONE, AS COLERIDGE PUT IT, TO "ENGAGE IN THE WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF", WHILE, WE MIGHT ADD, STILL KNOWING AT SOME LEVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS THAT THE EXPERIENCE IS UNREAL, WE SHALL BE BETTER PREPARED TO ASSIST IN CREATING FILMS THAT MEET THE CREATIVE AND ECONOMIC NEEDS OF WRITERS AND PRODUCERS AND THE FANTASY NEEDS OF CHILDREN.